

VZCZCXRO2152
RR RUEHPA
DE RUEHBP #0401/01 0941925
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 041925Z APR 06
FM AMEMBASSY BAMAKO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5175
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BAMAKO 000401

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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DEPT FOR AF, DRL, INR

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [ECON](#) [ML](#)

SUBJECT: LEGISLATIVE BY-ELECTIONS LEAVE OPPOSITION PARTIES
DEFLATED

REF: BAMAKO 00325

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On Sunday, March 26, Mali celebrated a "Day of Democracy" to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the 1991 uprising that overthrew former dictator Moussa Traore. In Mopti and Bamako's fifth district, Democracy Day coincided with legislative by-elections to fill two vacant National Assembly seats. Regarded as the first tangible test of next year's presidential campaign, many interpreted the results in Mopti, together with a remarkably low voter turnout in Bamako, as a serious setback for opposition leaders hoping to unseat President Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT) in 2007. At an event in Bamako to mark the 1991 popular uprising, National Assembly President (and principal opposition leader) Ibrahim Boubakar Keita (IBK) snubbed the Prime Minister, likely out of irritation over his party's allegations that government ministers intervened inappropriately in the Mopti by-election in the days leading up to the vote. In an extremely critical speech opening the National Assembly's April session, IBK decried the state of Malian democracy, as evidenced by the low voter turnout for the partial elections. End summary.

In Mopti, a Vote of Confidence for ATT

¶2. (U) The March 26 legislative by-elections in ATT's home region of Mopti generated particular interest among political observers in Mali. Many believed that a strong showing by the opposition Rally for Mali (RPM) on the President's home turf would signal trouble for ATT and cement RPM leader and National Assembly President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita's (IBK) status as a serious presidential challenger.

¶3. (U) In Mopti a coalition of 22 parties, including the former ruling party, the Alliance for Democracy in Mali (ADEMA), lifted the Union for Republic and Democracy (URD) to a landslide win over the RPM. According to official results, the URD pulled off a first round victory with over 74% of the vote. The RPM was a distant second with less than 19%. The voter turnout rate was 38%. One newspaper summed up the election result and its implications with the headline: "ATT Crushes IBK."

¶4. (U) Although the Mopti URD-ADEMA alliance received no overt support from ATT or his government, the appearance of five of ATT's cabinet Ministers in Mopti just days before the March 26 vote triggered a protest by the RPM. Following the vote, the RPM released list of election "irregularities" and called on Mali's Constitutional Court to annul the results. Many of the allegations appear to stem from what the RPM claims was an unfair electoral intervention by the

five Ministers who were in Mopti just days before the election, ostensibly to celebrate the opening of a local cell phone company branch office. It is extremely unlikely that the nine-member Constitutional Court would decide to overturn the result given the relative haziness of the RPM's fraud allegations and the enormous mandate handed to the URD.

No opposition votes in Mopti, no voters in Bamako

15. (U) In Bamako, the URD teamed up with the RPM and two smaller parties to confront an ADEMA candidate backed by the same coalition that had supported the URD in Mopti. Despite widespread press coverage prior to the election, polling places in Bamako's fifth district were deserted as the voter participation rate slumped to less than 8%. Voter apathy left the URD candidate with 32% and ADEMA with 23%. A second round run-off is scheduled for April 9. The lackluster turnout in Bamako was particularly disappointing for opposition leaders who hoped a strong show of support would signal that ATT's prospects for re-election in 2007 were not assured.

16. (U) Analysts attributed the low level of voter participation in Bamako to a variety of reasons. Bamako's fifth district is one of the city's largest and poorest with large numbers of migrants whose ties and interests are with other portions of the country. Many fifth district residents may have seen the elections as meaningless given high levels of unemployment, poverty and an absence of economic opportunities. Since Deputies elected through the by-elections must run again in 2007, the election may have

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simply failed to pique the interest of many in Bamako. Scheduling by-elections to coincide with Mali's Day of Democracy also depressed voter participation since much of Bamako was mobilized for the Democracy Day celebrations.

17. (SBU) Comment: By-elections are hardly an indicator of nationwide political trends, but IBK clearly feels his party (and his own presidential ambitions) to be under some pressure. At the March 26 annual commemoration ceremony in Bamako of the popular uprising that ousted Malian dictator Moussa Traore, IBK was a picture of pique over the alleged irregularities in Mopti. He failed to arrive in time to receive President Toure (a sine qua non of Malian protocol), and then snubbed the Prime Minister, standing next to him at the ceremony for 20 minutes without exchanging a word. Ten days later, in an extremely critical speech opening the April session of the National Assembly, IBK decried the state of Malian democracy, calling the low turnouts an indicator of a government that had lost its way. With presidential and legislative elections a year away, and with disappointing results from the two by-elections, IBK has clearly decided to move into full campaign mode to salvage his own and his party's prospects.
McCulley